

Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax – Family Meeting, Sunday, July 24, 2011

Part I

Mark Mullery:

Some time ago, we made a decision to stop having family meetings because they weren't being particularly well-attended. (laughter) And so, I think we've discovered the secret: just a little controversy, crisis....great family meeting opportunity. So....

Seriously, thanks so much for coming out tonight. Tonight we get to gather together as members and friends of our church, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We want to talk about recent events related to Sovereign Grace Ministries and to our church, as well.

We have three primary categories that we want to address tonight; items related specifically to Sovereign Grace Ministries and our church. And then that sort of connects into the second category, which would be the topic of child abuse as it connects with our church. And then, third would be – these are all connected – accusations that have been brought against Lou Gallo. We'll follow that presentation – those comments – with a time of question and answer. And then we'll close, taking time to pray together.

Now, these topics can seem disconnected, but there actually is a connection. Really, communication...We live in a time of communication transformation, and the Internet has become a powerful communication tool. It's changing the availability of communication and the pace of communication. And Sovereign Grace Ministries is making use of the Internet, blogs, etc. for communication purposes, but many others are as well. And some, who have been employing the Internet, are those who are critiquing Sovereign Grace Ministries. And in some of those places, Sovereign Grace Church here – our church in Fairfax – is being critiqued as well.

There are two blogs in particular – Sovereign Grace Ministries Survivor and Refuge – that contain material, not only obviously about our family of churches, but in particular about our church and, in particular related to our church, incidents including and involving child abuse. So, that's the Sovereign Grace Ministries-Sovereign Grace Church child abuse connection. One of those stories also contains accusations that have been brought against Lou. So, that's the Lou connection. We want to talk about those things with you tonight.

Before we do that, though, we want to turn to God's word so that our thoughts and perspectives are framed there. So, please open to Colossians, chapter 1: two verses familiar to us, if you were here for the series in Colossians, the series entitled "Preeminent." Colossians 1, verses 17 and 18.

And He (Christ) is before all things. And in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that in everything, He might be preeminent.

There are things shaking. There are questions. There are uncertainties. Here is something that hasn't changed. Here is something about which there is no doubt and no question, and that is that Jesus Christ is the head of the body. He is the head of the church. He's the head of the church universal. He's the head of the church worldwide. He's the head of our church. That has been and is true and always will be.

He is also the One in whom all things hold together. In a time of trouble, as we heard this morning – in this morning's text – in grievous times, times of being troubled, it is good to know that Christ is holding us together. He's the head of the body, and He is at work among us. And so, as we begin, let's just take a moment and pray.

Oh God our Father, blessed God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we address you through Jesus Christ, through the One who is the head of the body, the church, through the Preeminent One. We thank You that we have access to Your throne of grace tonight, through Christ our Mediator. And we come to that throne of grace tonight and lay hold of You as our loving Heavenly Father and pray that You would meet us, help us, shape us, conform us, transform us; that you would help our eyes tonight be fixed on Christ, even as we walk through various issues that are important and substantive, and relate to us. We pray that through this meeting tonight and through this season in our shared life together that the preeminence of Christ would increase, not only in our lives, but oh God, in our community and to the ends of the earth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are very grateful for the input that we've received. Many e-mails, questions, comments we've received recently from you. Last week, we initiated an assignment – a process – that we thought would be helpful in preparing for tonight. So, what we did was, we tried to collate what we've been hearing from you and put together what are the most important questions that we might be able to address tonight or might be able to work on some responses as we prepare for our question-and-answer time tonight. Well, we had five pages by the time we were done, over 100 questions. Not a very helpful Frequently Asked Questions list.

And obviously, we can't cover everything tonight. But fear not, this is part of the conversation, and we want to continue the conversation beyond tonight. We want to have more family meetings after this family meeting. And so, we are glad for your input, glad for your questions, and we want to keep talking. So please keep talking after tonight, and please don't be discouraged if we aren't able to get to the thing that's most important to you tonight. We're going to do our best to get to what we think is most important and what we're most prepared to deal with tonight.

So, what I'm going to do is I'm going to start and I'm going to make a few comments about Sovereign Grace Ministries in particular. I'm going to spend less time there for a couple of reasons.

This is an unfolding situation. And it's helpful to remember by way of background: CJ's announced leave of absence. That was announced less than 20 days ago [July 6,

2011], so it really hasn't been that long. And we're trying to process this material. It does take time. It's very important. There are very important and serious issues in Sovereign Grace Ministries right now, and we want to be able to process more and interact with and hopefully hear more from Sovereign Grace Ministries. So the next family meeting that we have, we want that to focus more on Sovereign Grace Ministries than we'll be able to do tonight.

But just by way of recap – and this is...I'm going to share a few thoughts similar to what I shared this morning, and then I want to provide some observations and some questions, as well, related to Sovereign Grace Ministries. But for those who perhaps weren't here this morning – were in children's ministry or whatever – by way of recap: July 6th, CJ Mahaney, president of Sovereign Grace Ministries, posted a statement on his blog, entitled "Why I'm taking a leave of absence." He communicated that he was doing that to address character issues and that he believed God was disciplining him, and wants to respond to what God is up to in his life.

Following that post, Brent Detwiler, a longtime leader in Sovereign Grace Ministries and one time a part of this church [from 1983-1991], circulated some 600 pages of documents [i.e., *Response Regarding Friendship & Doctrine, A Final Appeal, Concluding Remarks, The Untold Story*] to Sovereign Grace pastors, bringing charges against CJ. These were documents that he'd sought to be in dialog with CJ and the Sovereign Grace Board about and didn't find that process satisfactory, so he circulated those to the Sovereign Grace pastors. I received them, as did many, many other pastors. These ended up posted on the Internet. I just checked. As of Friday night, there'd been 59,000 hits on that site.

Now, point of clarification and retraction: This morning, several times I interacted with what I just said about these documents coming into circulation. And at one point, I said, "Brent posted his material on the Internet." That was inaccurate. I apologize for that. If I understand correctly, what I just said is, in fact, what's happened: He circulated the materials to the pastors, and then someone posted it on the Internet. And I do regret misspeaking and speaking in error about that this morning.

I also want to confess: I am not an inerrant communicator. I wish I was. I wish I could be, but I'm not. And so, please continue to let me or anyone who's addressing you know. When we speak to you in ways that are inaccurate or unhelpful, help us with that please. And thanks for your help this morning.

So, back to the story. The Sovereign Grace Board, in response to these documents from Brent circulating, responded with several posts that were, in my opinion, quite unhelpful. And this dissonance, this difference in response developed between Josh Harris, who is the senior pastor at Covenant Life, and the rest of the Board. And part of that dissonance involved Josh's resignation from the Board. And there did just then seem to be this explosion of commentary on the Internet, negative and positive. So, that's where we find ourselves tonight.

Now, how we got here is varied. Some of you have read all kinds of stuff. Some of you may have read all 600 pages of those documents. Some of you may know about and have visited these blogs a number of times. Some of you may not even have known about them before tonight. Some of you have followed these matters very closely. And some of you have chosen not to want to know what's going on in these communications.

So, not only has this group of people received a variety of inputs, but also we're experiencing a variety of responses. Some are confused. Some are hurt. Some wonder what all the fuss is about. Some are sad. Some are largely unaffected. But in all this, as I said this morning, it is trouble, but God is standing in the midst of us in the midst of this trouble, and He's here to refine us. He's here to purify us. He is here to fix our eyes more effectively on Christ and shape our lives and our shared life together more to be like Christ.

So, with that as background, what I want to do is I just want to make three personal observations and I want to pose four questions related to these Sovereign Grace Ministries events. I'm speaking for myself here. I'm not representing the entire team, because we just haven't had time to sort through all these things together.

Personal observation #1: As I mentioned this morning, the blog post from Sovereign Grace Ministries that contained resolutions in response to Brent Detwiler's circulating of his material, I found that blog post to be unacceptable in tone and content. It seemed defensive. It seemed heavy-handed. And, for me, it raised serious questions about the integrity and the legitimacy of the evaluation process that had been entered into with CJ. It failed to invite dialog and critique. The post that followed a couple of days later entitled "Listening" was better, but overall I would say I was disappointed and surprised by that blog post.

Personal observation #2: It seems to me that there's a need for a thorough review of the practice of leadership in Sovereign Grace Ministries – emphasize thorough – a *thorough* review. Key questions are undefined or unclear. What does it mean to be a member church? Does Sovereign Grace Ministries have any authority over churches in its family of churches, or is it simply a parachurch organization? What are the deficiencies in conflict resolution and pastoral evaluation that CJ references in his blog post? How can communication be improved between the Sovereign Grace Ministries Board and pastors and member churches? Reference point 1: These are not small items. A new coat of paint won't do. There's need for some tearing down, and there's need for some rebuilding.

Observation #3: Perspective. Let's slow down and take a deep breath. We're not talking about adultery, a false gospel, or someone stealing the contents of the checking account. The matters before Sovereign Grace Ministries are quite serious, but at another level, they're really not that surprising nor are they that unusual. This is in no way to make light of anyone's sin or anyone who has been sinned against. It's only to say the churches and families of churches and organizations, just like people – like you and me

– go through times of change, of evaluation, of assessment, of repentance. And this is common, and God is in these things. And, with humility, we can emerge the better for it.

For me, personally, I want you to know I love CJ. I love Sovereign Grace Ministries. I have deeply benefitted from our partnership in the gospel. I hope that partnership continues for decades to come. But let's be patient, let's pray, and let's do all that we can do in whatever role God provides us to help insure that that partnership is fruitful.

Three personal observations. Four personal questions. Again, I'm speaking for myself and not for the team.

Question #1: What role did the Sovereign Grace Ministries Board have in addressing CJ in these sin patterns in his life? Were Dave, Jeff, and Josh – for some time the Board members – correcting him, challenging him, or enabling him? What was the role of the Board in these things?

Question #2: How seriously does the Board view the broader situation? Is it worse than we think, or a situation that just requires some tweaking and fine-tuning? I need some more cues and understanding on that. And the blog posts have not helped me see that it's worse than we think, from their perspective, but it's a question.

#3: What will the process of assessing, making recommendations, and making changes look like for Sovereign Grace Ministries? Will it involve local church pastors, local church members? Will it involve ex-pastors who have been hurt or even disenfranchised by the deficiencies that have been previously described? Will it involve outsiders? What will the process look like?

Caveat: There are mirror images of many of these things reflected in the practice of leadership here. We'll have more to say on much of that later. But as I say these things, I say these things aware that we've got work to do here, as well.

Question #4: How is Sovereign Grace Ministries reaching out to ex-pastors and leaders who have been hurt and disenfranchised by the deficiencies that CJ describes?

So, those are a few preliminary questions that, for me, are important. And I look forward to and hope we will be receiving more understanding on these things and that the understanding that we receive will go in a helpful direction.

I want you to know we plan to work through these things as a team and we want to be faithful to share our perspectives with Sovereign Grace Ministries. And I know that a number of you have been doing that and been doing that very wisely, discerningly, charitably, and helpfully, and I thank you for that and ask that you continue to do that too. I appreciate that you're not only communicating with us, but you're communicating with our family of churches.

But I want you to know this is a lot to process, and it's a lot to process in the middle of the summer when people are coming and going. We met daily as pastors over the past week. We've set aside two days in early August to dig in more deeply to these issues, but these are not small issues and they require careful attention. And it will take some time to give them good attention.

I also want to be clear and I want to be humble in saying this: Our church reflects similar themes and similar deficiencies. The big topic here is leadership. But rather than commenting tonight on the broader elements of where we need leadership change here – and we will speak more about this in the future – I'd like to focus on one area in particular tonight. I want to narrow down to one particular area. It's an area of sad and hurtful failure on my part and on that of the pastoral team, as well.

We are in a time when Sovereign Grace Ministries and Sovereign Grace Church here in Fairfax are being critiqued for the way pastors have led. As I mentioned earlier, there are several blogs that have focused on these issues. Two stories, in particular, have appeared on those blogs that address situations in this church and address our pastors, in particular. What follows is a confession in response to these stories entitled Noel's Story [regarding Plaintiff Jane Doe] and Wallace's Story [regarding John Taylor Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karl Koe and Emily Rose Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karen Koe].

Romans 12:15, the second half, simply says, "Weep with those who weep." This is a good place to start when it comes to the topic of sexual abuse and the sexual abuse of children.

By now, many of you have become aware of two stories on Sovereign Grace Ministries Survivor blog and the Refuge blog, as well, I believe: one called Noel's Story, the other Wallace's Story. Both of these individuals were at one time members of our church and both have sad stories to tell.

Noel, a pen name, recounts the tragic story of the sexual assault of her young daughter [Plaintiff Jane Doe] which occurred in 1998. Wallace, also a pen name, tells of having two children molested [John Taylor Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karl Koe, Emily Rose Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karen Koe], the incidents coming to light in 1998 and 2007. In each of these cases, the perpetrators were young men [This is a reference to Nathan Ecelbarger and two other teenage abusers who were convicted for their crimes. See Complaints 131 & 164. N. Ecelbarger is equated with them and called a perpetrator by M. Mullery.] whose families were also part of our church. These incidents are still exceedingly painful for these families, and understandably so. No parent, no compassionate person, can learn of these sins without experiencing sorrow, grief, and heartache over the violation of these innocent children.

As sad as this is, it gets worse. When these incidents came to light, these families were in trouble. These were children who were victims, who had been horribly sinned against. "Blessed are the merciful," Jesus says, and moments like this require

extraordinary amounts of tender care, of merciful comfort. This is a time to bind up the broken-hearted and to weep with those who weep.

And that's just what your pastors did, right? Well, with deep regret, I confess we didn't. Noel and Wallace are justified in critiquing the pastoral care they received through their trials and afflictions. Sadly – and it breaks my heart to tell you this – sadly, in seeking to care for them, we became part of their trial. Like Job's counselors, we came in a time of need and made things worse. Looking back, we made many mistakes. Here are a few.

We lost sight of the victim. These are complicated moments. In the swirl of all the other things to think about, we lost sight of the simple fact that an innocent victim had been grievously sinned against and was in need of constant care. One of the moms reflected to me later and said, "For us, this was 24/7." We should have followed up more and over a longer period of time.

We failed to surround the victims and their families with care. We failed to surround them. Our instincts were to keep the circle of those who knew about this small. We weren't trying to cover anything up, but we did want to protect the identity of the victim. Sadly, this left the victim's parents without the support system they needed at the time when they most needed it. We should have made sure more people knew and knew quickly; both people in their care group, where they needed to be able to work these things through, and close trusted friends as well. Many more people were needed to be in place to extend care to the victim's family. We failed.

These were situations where the family of the victim [the Bridgwoods] and the family of the perpetrator [the Ecelbargers] were friends. There were pre-existing, close relationships. As they're trying to sort these things through, when relational conflicts arose between the victim's family and the perpetrator's family, we unwisely used a Peacemaker model for conflict resolution. This put them on an equal plane: "Get the log out of your eye, get the log out of your eye. Go for the speck, go for the speck."

This resulted in the victim's family being corrected when they should have been gently cared for as sufferers. Oh! I'm so sad we allowed that happen and led and participated in that way. I did that. Our aversion to therapeutic thinking kept us from language and people and resources that would have helped these families and would have helped us help these families.

We didn't give hurting people room to air their emotions. How in the world is somebody whose child has just been cruelly sexually abused going to process that flawlessly? Of course it's going to be raw. But, instead of giving them the room to work things through, we corrected them when they expressed themselves in ways that we deemed incorrect. I'm so sorry.

We were proud. We didn't know what we didn't know! We were ignorant. The hurts from these sins, the effect, the sexual abuse of a child runs deeper and lasts longer than

any of us could have imagined. We've been accused of not getting it. Guilty as charged. We didn't get it. I'm so sorry. (crying)

These aren't just stories or statistics. These are people. As an elder and a senior pastor, I had opportunities to bring mercy and grace, to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort the suffering. I was trying. I was attempting to be helpful. But it pains me to see how often, in retrospect, I wasn't. I deeply regret my impatience, self-righteousness, pride, hard-heartedness. These things compounded their suffering instead of easing it.

We've reached out to Noel and to Wallace and their spouses and families. It pains me to say, it grieves me to say that our attempts to be reconciled to them have not proven successful so far. Please pray that this might happen.

Now, for some of you, this may hit home because you may feel that you, too, have been hurt or mistreated by your pastors here. If that's the case, I'm sorry. And we want to humble ourselves and we want to make things right. If you don't feel safe talking to us, please bring a friend, write a note, reach out to us in some way. We really want to hear from you. We want to listen to you. We want to learn from you. We don't want to correct you. We want to discover where we've hurt you, where we've sinned against you, and seek your forgiveness so that we can change.

We deeply regret our failures with these families. We deeply regret the pain that we have caused. But we do thank God that we have a risen Savior in heaven. *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.* By God's grace, we commit ourselves to learning and growing and changing so that no parent ever has this experience in his church again.

We can't agree with everything that's written about us on the blogs, but we've tried to go to school on what we can agree with. We want our children to be safe. We want children who are hurt, victimized, or abused to be well cared for, and their families as well. We've tried to learn from our mistakes. We've tried to learn from these experiences and to make substantive changes in response.

So, Vince is going to come now and share with you how we're seeking to respond to these things.

Fairfax Sovereign Grace Church – Family Meeting, Sunday, July 24, 2011

Part II

Vince Hinders:

I want to echo Mark's comments to you, to thank you for being here tonight. This is an evening for all of us that is – for all of us on staff – an evening filled with great sorrow and sadness, for there has been much to be sorry about. And so thank you for being here tonight with us.

Acts 20:28 says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God."

Speaking for the other pastors, that were on staff when these incidents occurred, I want to communicate to you how terribly sorry we are as well. We failed in our care for these victims [i.e., John Taylor Bridgwood, Emily Rose Bridgwood, Plaintiff Jane Doe]. We did not provide the protection and the care that God would have us provide for them, and we are deeply, deeply sorry for that. We're very sorry for adding pain to these families who were already experiencing unbelievable pain.

I want to talk, in just a moment, about what we do in our church to protect our children, for there are many things that we do. And as these stories have gotten out there, there have been many questions about "Well, are our children safe here?" I want to address that in just a moment.

But I also want to clarify a few things that are on the Internet, and this is in no way to justify our actions. We were wrong. We made mistakes. However, in this Internet age, things get said about the church and about situations that sometimes are not factual, and so we want to just briefly clarify a few things.

First of all, in over 32 years of being a church [started in November 1979], we are not aware of any sexual abuse – any child sexual abuse – occurring at any church event or ever taking place on our church property. And no pastor or church worker, including children's ministry and youth ministry, has ever been accused of inappropriate contact with children. We don't say this to boast, but we are grateful to God for His protection. We really are. God has watched over us, and we are grateful for that.

In the Noel story And let me just say, in both of these stories – Noel and the Wallace story – I know all the people involved. I knew them before all these situations came to light, and it has been grievous to see the destruction that's occurred in the relationships between these families, in the relationships with some of these families with our church, with some of you who've been involved in these situations. It has, I think in my years of pastoral ministry, been the saddest things that I've ever been part of. It's been terribly sad.

As Mark mentioned, in the Noel story, the two families involved were family friends. They were neighbors. They were in the same care group. But there was no cover-up of these crimes. The boy's crime was reported to the police and Social Services by the victim's parents within 24 hours of disclosure at the urging of one of our pastors. And, over time and not soon enough, people from three different care groups in the area where these people lived were involved and knew about the situation.

In the Wallace story, of the first incident [Nathan Ecelbarger's molestation of John Taylor Bridgwood] – there were two noted in the Wallace story.... And, actually, this one's hard. I've known this family much closer. They've been friends. The two families in this first story [Bridgwoods & Ecelbargers] were friends – and close friends. And these events occurred in the neighborhood between young boys. This situation [regarding Nathan Ecelbarger] was never reported by the parents [or the pastors] to the police.

In the second incident, which came to our attention in 2007 [Emily Rose Bridgwood], again the situation was that they were family friends, and the abuse occurred in the home of the victim. The boy's crimes were reported to the authorities by the victim's parents sometime after the actual event, when it came to light.

And also, we just want to clarify one thing, that two days before the trial, two pastors on our staff were served with subpoenas. Both pastors appeared in court at the appointed date and time and were ready to testify if needed. They had never been asked by anybody to participate in that part of the process directly. However, it should also be noted that the perpetrator pled guilty, so they were never called to testify.

And, again, the only reason that we're trying to share this is not to justify our poor pastoring, but just to allay any fears that there are cover-ups that are going on in our church. That is not the case.

In both stories, as appropriate, we fully cooperated with the police and the Social Services. In both cases that were reported [Plaintiff Jane Doe and Emily Rose Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karen Koe], the perpetrator was convicted and completed their sentences. All the victims and perpetrators [including Nathan Ecelbarger] were minors at the time that these crimes were committed, which also made it so difficult in knowing who to tell, how much to tell, and how to provide care for the families.

Again, we are grateful that, in over 32 years [November 1979], we're not aware of any of this type of activity occurring in our church or by any of our church workers. And that's just the blessing of God. And so, I just wanted to clarify those things.

But the big question that people have is, "Are our children safe? Is it okay to have our children here?"

Well, I want to tell you a few of the things that we do have in place so that you are aware of what is in place for the protection of children. First of all, the church has a

Child Protection Guideline. As many of you who've been in the church any length of time or have children, you know that we maintain very tight controls for working with children via these guidelines. We're going to make copies of one of the addendums available in the lobby at the end of our meeting today so you can take it home with you. It explains in detail many of the key points in the Guidelines for the protection of our children.

For over 15 years, children's ministry has put into place the key elements of these Child Protection Guidelines. It's not something that just occurred overnight. We've been doing this for many, many years, and we're always seeking to improve and do better.

Based on Virginia law, the Child Protection Guidelines are founded upon a three-legged stool approach to ensuring safety and security of our children. The three legs of the stool involve the following three areas: reporting, screening those who work with children, and then also supervision and security, watching out for the children. That's why the children's ministry rooms have windows in the doors, so that children are never alone with an adult where people can't look in and see what's happening.

We also provide background checks and conduct background checks. All the pastors have had extensive police background checks, and I'm glad to report that all of us were cleared of anything found in our backgrounds.

The names of all children's ministry workers scheduled for serving are checked with the National Sex Offender Database. Also, we maintain a list of people who are disqualified from serving in children's ministry, and that list is regularly sent to the children's ministry leadership team to ensure that those people are never down in the children's ministry areas.

Security is one of the other areas that we look into in providing care for the children in the church, but also for the whole church. Two years ago, Tim Lewis, our church administrator, noticed that there were incidents of crimes of violence occurring on church properties around the country, and it was becoming more and more frequent. Tim did some research to see what other churches were doing, and then recommended to the pastoral team that we develop a security plan, which also included the creation of a security team. The security plan was reviewed and endorsed by the Fairfax County Crime Prevention Unit, and the security team consists of 15 men, including both former and current law enforcement officers and military personnel.

The mission of the security team is to prevent or minimize the actions of individuals who intend to harm others or disrupt gatherings on our church property, and to manage emergencies that affect the safety of our church members.

So, we have Child Protection Guidelines, we have a children's ministry leadership team who's aware of what's going on. We have a security team.

And, this isn't something that we've done recently, but we're going to do this, and this is upcoming. One of the men from the church who works in law enforcement has asked a colleague from the FBI who specializes in crimes against children to give a detailed presentation for parents and child caregivers on a number of cases in this specialized area of child protection. The focus of this presentation will be, in part, on how the subjects of these cases obtained access to their victims – What signs were evident while abuse occurred? – and how parents and caregivers can work to protect children from these situations. This presentation will also cover aspects of Internet security, with examples where children became victims through routine Internet use.

And so, we'll be getting out to you as soon as we're able to secure the date with this agent exactly when we're going to have it, and what time. We'll give you plenty of advance warning for that. It's not the type of thing where children should come because of the types of material that's covered, and so we'll work with you to make sure that every adult, every parent that wants to come can attend this training session.

Over the years, and even more recently, we have sought to share with our care group leaders what we're learning. Last year, we spent a Saturday morning reviewing what we've been learning about caring for the victims. We shared with them the things that Mark was just talking about: these lessons learned about where we've failed and how to prevent that in the future. We don't want to make the same mistakes. We don't want to ignorantly walk into situations and not provide the care that people need. And so, we sought to expand the circle. We brought the care group leaders into what we've been learning because we want to avoid future mistakes.

Also, over the past two years we've been using the services of John Lauber, who is a CCEF-trained counselor in the area. He's in Vienna, and John has extensive experience in helping abuse victims. Not only has he met with people in our church, many of whom were abused as children and are now much older in life, but he has provided countless hours of counsel to us in helping us learn how to care for victims in a more careful and God-glorifying way. He has also come and spoken to our care group leaders about caring for victims.

One resource that we have found is a book by Diane Langberg. It's called *On the Threshold of Hope*. It looks like this, and it's available in our bookstore. The subtitle of the book is *Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. It is a wonderful book. It is extremely helpful. It's been read by all the pastors, it's been given to our care group leaders, and it's also available in our bookstore.

As I close this section, I just want to communicate once again: We do care about protecting our children. We have children, and we know you and we know you have children. We want every child to find this church to be a safe place. And not only that, but we are committed – we are committed – to growing and learning how to care for victims. We have failed, but we want to grow by the grace of God.

If you're aware of any resources or any things that you think would help us as a church to grow and learn and develop in these areas that we need to grow in, please, please forward them to us. Let us see it. Send us the links. Whatever it is, we want your help in this. We want to grow together as a church community.

I want to share with you now a recent example of how, by God's grace, we're seeking to apply some of the lessons that we've learned in the area of sexual sin. In May, the pastors of the church learned that one of our members – this is going to be surprising to some – that one of our members was arrested on charges of possession of child pornography. As we looked into the situation, we learned that this person served as a helper in the eight-year-olds' class in our children's ministry since 2005. Thankfully, there are no charges that he inappropriately contacted any children. He is currently out on bail, and he knows that we're speaking about this here tonight, and he is fully cooperating with us on that.

So, what did we do when we found out about this? Well, his care group leader and other men from the care group were involved in assisting the pastors to determine if there was any danger to the children in our church. Several meetings were held with him. Many questions were asked and asked again. We immediately had him sign a sex offender agreement that clearly stipulates the rules for him to be present within our church and present in our church meetings and in our church community. The children's ministry team was immediately alerted of the identity of this individual.

An example of what's on the sex offender agreement is that when he comes to church here on Sundays, he is escorted by an adult male member of the church from the moment he comes to church, and he is not to go near any of the children's ministry classes.

We also assembled an advisory team that included members of our church who are involved in our children's ministry and our security teams, and two of them have law enforcement experience and backgrounds, for which we are very grateful. They have much insight to give us.

We also contacted Detective Schmidt of the Fairfax County Police Department, and I personally met with him here at the church in order to seek his assistance in conducting our own internal review. Based on recommendations from the Children Protection Advisory Team that we assembled, and with input from Detective Schmidt, the pastors personally contacted 33 teachers, helpers, and bathroom monitors who've served in the eight-year-olds' class since 2005, and asked them questions about this person's activities. Thankfully, there were no indications that any inappropriate activity occurred with any of our children.

We communicated the results to Detective Schmidt, and we are now in the process of notifying the remaining families of children who participated in the eight-year-olds' class during the timeframe in question. We have a few more people to call, and this will be completed by the end of this week.

And I just wanted to make a blanket appeal here. Please, please let us know if you have any questions or if you've ever had any questions or concerns about any child's safety or about any adult's behavior toward the children in our church. We want to know this. We want to protect the children in this church.

That section that Mark just ended with and I just covered is really the second section of our meeting here tonight.

Fairfax Sovereign Grace Church – Family Meeting, Sunday, July 24, 2011

Part III

Vince Hinders:

The third section that's connected comes to the topic of "Why were there allegations being made against Lou Gallo?" And that's our third topic. And I just want to be clear from the outset: There have never been allegations of sexual abuse by Lou. That is not the nature of what he is being accused of.

In September 2010, we informed several members of the church about a longstanding relational conflict that Lou and Lisa have been in with another family that's not in our church. What we didn't say at the time is that these are Lou [Defendant Louis Gallo] and Lisa's relatives [Lisa Gallo and Lori Bridgwood are sisters]. This is Wallace's Story [written by Tom Bridgwood].

Lou and Lisa have attempted to resolve these relational conflicts with their relatives in a humble and biblical way, most recently through an independent, professional Christian conciliator here in Fairfax. Sadly, the situation hasn't improved over time and has, in fact, deteriorated. The other family withdrew from the mediation process, contacted the pastoral team, and made a charge against Lou that he has engaged in a pattern of deception which is still current and could possibly disqualify him from being an elder.

Now, when we receive an accusation, it's important that we go back to God's word so that we understand how to process something like this. Let me read to you from I Timothy 5, verses 19-21:

Do not admit a charge against an elder, except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without pre-judging, doing nothing from partiality.

We have had many, many interactions with the other party over the past two-and-a-half years. And as I said, I've known these people a long, long time. And we believe we have heard and done our best to understand their concerns for us and the way that we handled their abuse cases, and also their concerns for Lou.

We have spoken at length with Lou and Lisa, and we believe that they have provided reasonable, humble, and honest answers and responses to the questions that they've been asked by their relatives. Lou and Lisa want to honor the Lord in this situation.

In an effort to find an impartial group to mediate between these families, a mediation group in Fairfax was agreed to by both families, and because we were saddened over how we contributed to Wallace's sorrow because of our mistakes, and because we wanted to do all that we could to help the reconciliation process between these two families, the two mediators from Conflict Resolution & Conciliation Services were

retained and paid for by the church. In no way did we intend to influence the outcome of the mediation. We were seeking to serve.

After multiple meetings over eight hours, they could not corroborate the charge being made against Lou, and they said in their report to us, "There was nothing apparent in Lou's responses or conduct during the mediation that, in what we observed, reflected a current attempt to avoid accountability or clear himself of any wrongdoing. Rather, there was clearly apparent conviction and heartfelt grief."

That confirmed the experience that we have had with Lou through this entire process. So, based on our many years of experience with Lou and from all the information we've reviewed, and the report from the mediators, we believe these charges against Lou are unfounded.

Lou has humbly sought to be reconciled. When this conflict emerged, Lou and Lisa offered to meet with the other family's pastor to get help with mediation because Lou and Lisa knew that they distrusted Sovereign Grace Church and Sovereign Grace Ministries. So, they said, "Hey, we'll go to your pastor. We'll go to your place." Sadly, the other family declined.

Since then, Lou's listened to their concerns, he's acknowledged his sin where appropriate, and he's accepted responsibility for his own contribution to the relational conflict. In addition, he has repeatedly reached out and gone to these family members in person. He has written letters and e-mails of apology, and has been in conciliation meetings with them for a total of over eight hours.

In late 2010, the pastoral team sent a letter to the family who made the charge against Lou, and told them of our decision. Sadly, they told us, "The church will hear the truth, regardless of any conclusions you come up with on your own."

So, in early April, they posted Wallace's Story. In it, they disclosed their complaints regarding our pastoral care of their family and the deficiencies they see in how we care for people who are suffering, especially victims of abuse. And, as we've tried to communicate, some of those things are very much true. We need to grow in those areas.

Secondly, though, regarding matters pertaining to their longstanding conflict with the Gallos, they also made accusations against us about our handling of the charges against Lou. We want you to know that as this family has brought their observations to us over the past two-and-a-half years, we have sought to follow a Matthew 7:1-5 approach by humbly listening and asking forgiveness many times for our failures, and endeavoring to repent and change as a result.

In addition, we've sought help along the way from Sovereign Grace Ministries, from Peacemaker Ministries, from Conflict Resolution & Conciliation Services. And at one point, we invited one of the bloggers [Jim Pappadeas] from the Refuge blog – the one who manages that site – to actually come here to the church and sit in on our mediation

meetings with them. We didn't have anything to hide. We want to be reconciled to them.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts to be at peace with this family, in accordance with Romans 12:18, we have been unsuccessful in bringing these situations to a peaceful resolution. And that saddens us greatly. And I know it saddens Lou and Lisa greatly. This has been a tremendous, tremendous ordeal for them because, not only do they have this relational estrangement, but there's also this desire that they have to care for their relative who's been abused, and they're not able to do that.

So, we are saddened by this current state of unreconciled relationships between these two families. And we thought it would be helpful tonight for you to hear from Lou, and so he's going to come up and share his experience.

Lou Gallo:

Well, these are sad situations that we find ourselves talking about tonight. And we're talking about the horror of child abuse [against John Taylor Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karl Koe; Emily Rose Bridgwood, a.k.a. Plaintiff Karen Koe; and Plaintiff Jane Doe] and the sorrow of a broken relationship. (crying)

We live in a world where bad things happen, and the things we're talking about tonight are as bad as it gets. And what makes this situation even more difficult is that we're talking about our family members, as one of the stories that you have heard tonight involves my niece [Emily Rose Bridgwood].

In March of 2008, we became aware of a breach in our relationship with this family. The issues that they brought to us in the form of e-mails grieved us very much, and they involved deficiencies in our care for them during very painful times in their lives. And sadly, it's been over three years now since Lisa and I became aware of this break in our relationship. And there really is no adequate way to express the sadness I feel for what happened to my niece and the pain this family has experienced.

We love them - I'm sorry, I'm really trying to compose myself here - we love them and we were immediately grieved about the grievances that they had brought to us, the grievances primarily concerning my deficient care for them during some of the most painful times of their lives. Once I became aware of their complaints, I immediately contacted them and expressed my love for them and my desire to be reconciled to them. And I acknowledged that we had hurt them and we want to hear about that. I suggested that we meet with someone that they trusted - a pastor in their church - since some of their grievances were also with Sovereign Grace Ministries and our church, in particular. We needed someone outside Sovereign Grace to help us through this conflict.

As it was similar to other breaks in our relationship that have occurred over the past 18 years, I wanted very much to understand my contribution as to why this kept

happening. Over the course of the next months and years, I made several attempts to own my sin and to ask for their forgiveness. I will outline some of the sins that I became aware of and have grieved over and sought to confess to them in person, in writing, in e-mails, and with a third-party mediator.

As I began to understand the things they were bringing to me, I confessed to them my deficiencies in caring for them and that I did not love them like Hebrews 13:3 states: *Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*

I did not put myself in their world in an adequate way. I did not bear their burden in a loving and sensitive way. For this, I am truly sorry, and attempted to express this to them with all sincerity. I confessed to them that I was proud and selfish. I allowed the normal relating that we were doing as families to lull me into thinking that proper care was happening.

At two significant times in this family's life, I allowed my fear of health issues Lisa faced to cloud my judgment, and combined with my own sin I hurt and disappointed this family as I selfishly viewed my world and lost sight of theirs. I have tried very hard to express my deep sorrow over this.

Sadly, I stand here tonight, and we have not been reconciled. We have had a short time of reconciliation after meeting, as Vince mentioned, with the third-party impartial mediator that both of our families agreed to. Forgiveness was extended, and that very night Lisa and I went to their home and asked their children's forgiveness, and of our niece in particular. We enjoyed a wonderful and tearful reunion as families.

The pastoral team and a representative from Sovereign Grace Ministry received an e-mail from this family sharing the news that they had forgiven us and our relationship had been restored. After three weeks of relating again as families, the relationship suddenly deteriorated and, sadly, we find ourself here tonight.

God is using this circumstance in my life to shape me and conform me into the image of His Son. For Lisa and I, this has been by far the most painful and difficult trial of our lives. And the sadness over what happened to my niece and the unresolved conflict is hard to bear at times.

There is a long and complicated history to our relationship, and I am aware that there are many things stated on the Internet. So, I want to say this: If you have specific questions, please see me. You are our dear friends, and I want you to be able to ask me any question that you have. Please see me after this meeting, e-mail me, call me. I welcome your questions for me, and I desire to walk in honesty and humility with you.

And I want to say that, if you are sitting there and you've experienced any of this from me, please see me. If I have treated you this way, I want to know that.

And one last thing I would ask: Please pray for our niece. Please pray for our families to be reconciled. We need a miracle. And, thankfully, we have a miracle-working Savior. Thank you for listening to me. (applause)

(break in audio)

Vince Hinders:

And let's pray. Lisa, could you come and...yeah, we'll just come on down.

Our gracious, heavenly Father, we declare our dependence on You right now. We thank You for the way that Lou and Lisa have walked in the light and sought to be pleasing to You in acknowledging what they need to acknowledge. And we know that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. Thank You for forgiveness that comes in and through Jesus Christ.

And we pray for there to be reconciliation between these families. We pray for the miracle that Lou just asked for. Father, would You restore these families to a right way of relating? Lord, would true forgiveness be extended? Would relationships be restored? Would fellowship occur between these families?

Father, we also pray for their niece and for the child in Noel's story [Plaintiff Jane Doe], and for any other child [e.g. John Taylor Bridgwood] that is suffering sexual abuse. Father, we pray for Your protection over these children. We pray for Your healing of these children. Oh Lord, we know that these sins perpetrated against these young children can oftentimes have many, many longstanding, damaging effects. And Lord, we pray for restoration. We pray for healing. We pray that these children would be able to see who they are in light of Christ and not in light of what has been done to them. Oh Lord, may they find their identity in Jesus Christ.

And so, Father, we lift all of these things up to You. We ask You to hear our prayers. And we pray them in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

How about we take about five minutes before we start the Q&A? It might be good if anybody needs to use the restroom.

[end of audio]